



Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in 1949.

# *The Cultivation of Young Gorbachev*

Past Friends Trace the Roots of Mikhail Sergeyevich's Ambition

By David Remnick  
Washington Post Foreign Service

**O**ne autumn morning 41 years ago in the village of Privolnoye, Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev woke early in his parents' house, a two-room hut made of mud, manure and straw with pigs and chickens and an outhouse in the yard. The harvest was over. The village schools were opening. Gorbachev tucked a package of home-grown food under his arm, met up with his friend Dmitri Markov and began the 10-mile walk to Krasnogvardeiskoye's High School No. 1.

The horse-drawn carts lugging loads of corn, the peasant women with silver teeth and humped backs and mud-covered boots, the steam rising from the loaves of hay: All of it could have been southern Russia two or three centuries before. "These were hard times after the war, and life was even simpler, more basic in the villages than it is today," says Yulia Karagodina, Gorbachev's high school sweetheart. "The pace of life was almost frozen in time."

Every Monday Gorbachev arrived here on foot and rented a bed in the house of an old retired couple. Weekends he returned home to work in the fields. The brick two-story high school fast became the center of Gorbachev's universe. It became a laboratory of small-town success where the son of peasants would score high marks, star in school plays, win the confidence of his classmates and the heart of the dark-eyed Yulia. He would also begin a career in the hermetic world of Stalin's Communist Party that would, four decades later, see him become the leader of the Soviet Union and the orchestrator of the most remarkable series of political changes since the end of World War II.

According to school friends, teachers, college roommates and fellow party workers, the young Gorbachev was an ambitious adolescent, smart and self-confident, a leader but a conformist, as doctrinaire as the times he lived in. Yulia Karagodina, who, like her classmates, describes her relationship with Gorbachev as "young love," says, "You know, it's funny, but whenever I watch him now on television leading the Supreme Soviet, I think of Misha in school, playing the Grand Prince in Lermontov's 'Masquerade' or heading the morning gym class, shouting into a big megaphone:



Yulia Karagodina and Gorbachev in 1949.

'Ready, class! Hup, two, three, four! Hup, two, three, four...'

Personal detail about political leaders has become one of the great trivial pursuits of the West. The pop psychoanalysis of those details makes the ambitious teenager into the inevitable president, the sullen adolescent into the inevitable embezzler.

What does it mean to history, for example, that Gorbachev grew up almost as an only child? His one sibling, his brother Alexander, was born 17 years after Gorbachev and now works at the military's General Staff in Moscow. Alexander's name is rarely mentioned in Gorbachev's official biographies. "Because of the difference in age, I don't think they were particularly close," says Giorgi Gorlov, the for-

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# Young Gorbachev

GORBACHEV, From B1

Former regional party secretary in Krasnogvardeyskoye and a family friend.

The future is not so much determined as hinted at. "There are a lot of things you could say about Mikhail in the old days that you could say now," says Gorbachev's college roommate, Rudolf Koltchanov, now the deputy editor of the labor newspaper *Trud*. "He was hard-working, a good listener, tolerant, decent, but he was also much like the rest of us. In fact, he was not the most impressive student in our class by any means. And he believed what he was taught about Stalin. It's not as if he were always a great reformer and world leader just waiting to happen."

Despite his policy of democratization, Gorbachev has never suffered the scrutiny of a real political campaign, much less the assault of a hungry press corps in search of his "character." Gorbachev's climb to power took place inside the Soviet Communist Party, an institution that values aggressive obedience and secrecy. The initiator of *glasnost* reveals little of himself except through political performance. The Soviet Union is not likely to see him anytime soon sitting by the hearth with a Russian Barbara Walters, petting the family spaniel and pouring out his soul, prime-time.

When Gorbachev appears on television, Soviet viewers can sense a few things about the man. From the way he speaks his "g's" and makes them breathy "h's," the way he sometimes puts the stress on the wrong syllable or fouls up his verb conjugations, they know he is from the northern Caucasus. From his gestures, and the way he sometimes loses his temper, eliding into a singing song of anger, they know he is a southerner. "Siberians are cool and reserved, but people down here are explosive as gunpowder," says Igor Minayev, a director of the agricultural institute in Stavropol where Gorbachev took an advanced degree.

The best biography so far of the Soviet leader, written by the exiled biologist Zhores Medvedev, has yet to be printed here. The book explores Gorbachev's patrons in the party, his various failures as a leader of agriculture, his jockeying for political power. Such discussions here are still not welcome. Most of what passes is rumor, and nasty rumor at that. The latest is that Raisa is Gorbachev's second wife. "That's a lot of bunk, of course," says Viktor Fomenko, the director of the Stavropol Dramatic Theater and an acquaintance of the family for 25 years. "It's just malice talk."

Some people in the villages where Gorbachev first made his mark are reluctant to talk about their favorite son, or paint him only in the most saintly hues. One former colleague in Stavropol who could not contain his retrospective admiration said, "You know, I don't think Mikhail Sergeyevich even had that birthmark on his head when he was here." But many who knew him provide a picture of Gorbachev's village past and even a glimpse at the character that now dominates the world stage.

"It would be ridiculous to say that we somehow always knew that Mikhail Sergeyevich would turn out as he did," says Gorbachev's chemistry teacher, Yekaterina Chaika. "He is a man of his time, and there are countless factors of history that come into play. But if you want to understand him better as a man, it doesn't hurt to know where he came from. Like anyone, he has roots. And those roots are right here."

## Privolnoye Days

Privolnoye is now a village of around 3,000—farmers mostly—living in one-story houses and huts. There is one paved road and some dirt ones all near the muddy stream known as the Yegorlik River. A black bull is tethered to the green fence surrounding Gorbachev's first schoolhouse. Ducks and geese wade down the road.

Privolnoye, which is roughly translated as "free and easy," can no longer be called an entirely typical village. Not when the KGB is in town keeping a close watch on the white brick house with blue-green shutters where Gorbachev's mother, Maria Pantelyelevna, has lived for about 15 years. Gorbachev's mother is in her late seventies, and according to people in the area, rarely goes out. She is a Russian Orthodox believer—unlike her son and late husband—but her health is said to be failing, and she is not seen much in church anymore.

According to the pace and the faces of the village, Maria Pantelyelevna refused to move to Moscow. She does have a few modern conveniences that were not around when her son lived there: television, indoor plumbing, a telephone. The old honking menger in the yard is gone, though. "She said, 'At least let me keep the rooster so I'll get up in the morning,'" says Giorgi Gorlov, an old family friend.

According to records discovered by the local Communist Party committee, the Gorbachev family came to Privolnoye from the Ukraine in the 1840s—a period of rapid resettlement much like what happened in the American West. There are a number of Gorbachevs on the World War II memorial in Privolnoye, and

one of the mud roads in town is known, informally, as *Ulitsa Gorbacheva*—Gorbachev Street.

At the very moment Gorbachev was born in March 1931, southern Russia and the Ukraine were living through one of the most brutal acts of political terror ever devised. In an effort to force the population into collective farms, Stalin purged the successful peasants, known as *kulaks*, and began an artificial famine that killed millions. According to Western studies, more than 30,000 people in the environs of Stavropol, the regional capital, died during the terror-famine of 1931-32.

Gorbachev's maternal grandfather, however, was a committed communist and became the chairman of a collective farm. Several sources say this grandfather was the most essential influence on Gorbachev's early development, providing the boy with advice on farming and giving him good books (Pushkin's poems, Lermontov's "A Hero of Our Time") from the farm's unusually good library. And as a result of his grandfather's position, Gorbachev's first understanding of collectivization was likely to have been a great deal more sympathetic than that of a kulak.

Even now, when Gorbachev is leading the campaign to return land to the peasants and de-emphasize the vast, inefficient collective farms, he speaks only in euphemism about the famines in the south. "Most people did not even talk with their children about the starvation period, and most people of Gorbachev's generation considered collectivization a great success," says Minayev, the agriculture institute director.

A hardship that is undoubtedly clearer to Gorbachev's memories is the six-month-long Nazi occupation of the Stavropol region when he was 11. "The situation here for ordinary Russians was not nearly as bad as it was in Leningrad and the other major fronts, but for Jews especially it was horrible," says Fomenko, the theater director. "Once in Stavropol I witnessed the Nazi SS rounding up hundreds of Jews and shooting them right there on the city square. The blood was on the streets for days."

In Stavropol's Komsomol Museum there are many war posters from Gorbachev's childhood, including one of a stern peasant woman clutching wheat in her left hand and a machine gun in her right. "Comrades," it reads, "Answer Your Motherland With Victory." Gorbachev's father, Sergei, a tractor driver, was wounded on the Polish front.

Sergei drove a tractor on the Kheleborop (now Sverdlov) collective farm until he died 13 years ago. "He went out in the morning to feed the animals and he just fell down and died," Gorlov says. "Gorbachev at the time was already the regional secretary and we were all together in Moscow before the start of the 25th Party Congress. The Defense Ministry flew him down for the funeral and he returned the same night. He was staying at the Rossiya Hotel. We all came to see him and Raisa Maximovna in their room to give our condolences. He was very sad, obviously. But he was there the next morning. He never missed a minute of the Congress."

The cemetery in Privolnoye has many crosses, but there is no cross over Sergei Gorbachev's grave—only a smooth stone of dark granite. Compared to millions of others, Gorbachev and his family suffered relatively little from the trials of history. They were not broken by collectivization or the war. What dominated their lives was farming, the rhythms of harvest and planting and winters with the hard winds across the plain. The modesty of the Soviet leader's childhood, despite its relative good fortune, cannot be underestimated. He was born with a peasant's wooden spoon in his mouth; his favorite meal was a youth, according to his fellow Privolnoye farm worker, Alexander Yakovenko, was *krass*, a drink made of fermented bread, and the peasant dish known as *khodolots* (Boil ham hocks in water for three hours until the meat comes off the bone. Add carrots, onions, salt and pepper. Remove the bones, and allow the mixture to cool into a mold. Slice. Serve with mustard).

Local party officials—including Gorbachev's grandfather—set peasant plans, and the few farming brigades that exceeded them were awarded medals and citations. Working with his father and the Yakovenko family, Gorbachev spent his teen years summers on a rickety S-80 combine harvesting grain.

"It's still hard work in a broiling sun," says Minayev. "Your lungs fill up with dust and by the end of the day the dirt is so packed into you that only your eyes and your teeth are still clean." To cool off, the two boys, Gorbachev and Yakovenko, stripped and sat in barrels of river water. Later, when he was the regional party leader, Gorbachev would visit the farms in the region, and still his traveling party when old farming friends like the shepherd Vasily Rudenko would greet him with a bearing and "Hey, Mishal! Have you eaten?"

The Gorbachev-Yakovenko team was a local success, so much so that they earned a banner headline in the June 20, 1948, edition of the Rod of Ilyich, the local newspaper: "Comrade S. Gorbachev is Ready to Harvest." The next year, while he was



Gorbachev with Yulia Karagodina in a 1949 production of "The Snowgirl."

attending high school in Krasnogvardeyskoye, the team won the coveted honor, the Medal of the Red Banner.

## Best Boy

"You want to see Mikhail Sergeyevich's grades? I think we have them here in the safe."

Oleg Sredini is the high school principal now, a man 15 years younger than Gorbachev. Plump, yet graceful as Gleason, Sredini darts across his office to the safe and brings out a musty, Dickensian ledger.

He opens to 1950, the year of Gorbachev's graduation, and there, in a studied, formal handwriting and faded ink is "Gorbachev, Mikhail Sergeyevich." On a grade scale from 5 to 1, Gorbachev is a nearly uninterrupted row of 5's: algebra, Russian literature, trigonometry, history of the Soviet Union, the Soviet constitution, astronomy and so on. The one blemish is a 4 in German. Apparently his class in Privolnoye refused to take German after the war, so he was a bit behind when he got here," Sredini says in a tone of reverent reverence. "That is why he got the silver medal, not the gold."

Even today, in its new location, the high school is grim. Outside it is a trough filled with water so that the students can clean the mud off their shoes. But for the portrait of Mikhail Gorbachev on Sredini's office wall, the school lacks the old reverence for a Great Leader. In the school's hall of fame today, Gorbachev is just one medal winner among many, a future general secretary next to the chairman of the Komsomol, the class poet.

"In our day there were lots of pictures of Stalin, of course. I remember one especially, a portrait of Stalin and Mao called 'The Great Friendship,'" says Yuri Serikov, one of Gorbachev's classmates and now a history teacher at the schools. "It was absurd, but what did we know?"

Many of Gorbachev's favorite teachers, such as Yulia Suntsova, who pushed her students to act in school plays and read the Russian classics, are dead. But a few are retired and living in town. Chaika, the chemistry teacher, an elegant old woman with brilliant eyes, remembered Gorbachev as "clearly hard-working and interested in everything."

"We all listened to him and followed him. You could sense his presence as a leader right away. But we were as shocked as anyone that he landed the way he did," says Yuri Serikov, one of Gorbachev's friends and classmates who now teaches history at their old high school.

Gorbachev, it seems, was gravitating to the front and center. With a shock of dark hair, a stocky, powerful build and self-confidence beyond the reach of the other village kids, he had a "certain presence," says his former classmate Yelena Dimitrieva, who lives in Krasnogvardeyskoye.

"He was fearless for someone that age. I remember him correcting teachers in history class, and once he was so angry at one teacher he said, 'Do you want to keep your teaching certificate?'" recalls Gorbachev's old girlfriend Karagodina. "He was the sort who felt he was right and could prove it to anyone, be it in the principal's office or at a Komsomol meeting."

Inevitably Gorbachev headed toward the Soviet equivalent of class president, heading the school's Komsomol Young Communist League organization. He became a candidate for membership in the Communist Party when he was 18.

He was a kind of Soviet Best Boy, with conventional ambitions and ideas. "We were told that Stalin was doing everything perfectly, and we believed it all," says Serikov, who teaches history now. "That was our level of understanding, and Mikhail Sergeyevich was no exception. None of us ever thought twice about it."

## First Stage, First Love

To explain Ronald Reagan's ease



Yulia Karagodina in 1952.

in front of a television camera, much has been made of his career in "Naughty but Nice" and other classics. It turns out that Gorbachev's own confidence on the world stage has its roots in the high school drama club, in Krasnogvardeyskoye, he played the Grand Prince Zvezdoch in Lermontov's "Masquerade" and the lovelorn Mezir in the fairy tale "Snowdrop, Snegurochka," or "The Snow Girl."

Gorbachev's dramatic career also intersected with his interest in Yulia Karagodina, a poor school teacher's daughter from the village of Ladapol. In pictures of the young costars, Gorbachev is dark and regal in his homemade costume and fake mustache. Karagodina is wide-eyed, delicate, a bit faraway. Today she is plumper, her hair is done up in a bouffant. She has been married and divorced, and asks that only her maiden name be used to avoid further publicity ("My husband's jealousy about Mikhail Sergeyevich didn't help matters"). "I suppose it would be fun to talk just this once," she says, "but I don't want to make it a habit. I have a quiet life."

These days, Karagodina teaches at a scientific institute and in her basement laboratory, she sits down to a cup of tea, some biscuits and a saucer of homemade apricot jam, or *varenye*. As she talks she steadily drifts into her own memories, and by the time she is through two hours later, Yulia Karagodina says "that was a great time" with Gorbachev and her other friends in Krasnogvardeyskoye. "I have come back to her."

"I was attracted to him, he was magnetic. But I'd be upset if you thought that our relationship was like those that young people have now. It just wasn't that way. We were close friends, and we cared for each other and helped each other. It was—what would you say?—a specific kind of friendship, not just a Komsomol thing. Young love, you might call it. We met for the first time in the September he arrived at school, and after a few months we grew closer. He once told me that he had liked a blond girl named Tala in Privolnoye, but that was more a child's affection."

"Once we were rehearsing Ostrovsky's play 'The Snowgirl.' And there is a point where the Snowgirl—that was me—says 'Dear Czar, ask me a hundred times that I do.' I said those lines in open rehearsal, with the principal sitting right there in the audience. Suddenly, Gorbachev leaned over and whispered in my ear, 'It's true!'

"My God! I was shaken. I could hardly go on with my monologue. Everyone was asking what happened, and then was Gorbachev to the side, smiling. Sometimes we spoke rather roughly to each other, but I was so dumbfounded, I couldn't answer."

"The truth is, he was a very good actor. There was a time when he even talked with me, and his friends Boris Gladskoi and Gennadi Donskoi about trying for a theatrical institute. But I think he really always wanted to be a lawyer."

"We never really spoke about the future, except that we would go to Moscow and study there together. I'll tell you the truth. If we had been well dressed, well fed and had everything like this generation, then maybe we would have talked about such things. But they were hard times, and we concentrated on our studies."

"Misha could be jealous at times. Gennadi Donskoi also liked me. But I must say I preferred Misha. He was much bolder. Gennadi was shy, the artist type who drew very well. He is a major general now in the army."

"I was very proud and poor. [Gorbachev] was better off. He was better dressed. During the war, my family had been evacuated from Krasnodar to the Stavropol region. Gorbachev's family was living in its own house on its own soil. They always had enough to eat."

"He once invited me to come meet

his parents in Privolnoye. I said that I had been brought up in such a way that I could not do such a thing. I was too proud. I think I must have felt that his parents would feel that I was offering myself to them. But I did have friends in the village, so I went: Misha, Gennadi Donskoi, Lyuba and me. I spent the night at Lyuba's, and the next morning she said we should go meet Misha's mother. We walked as far as a little bridge, but I could go no farther. I froze. I just imagined how they would look at me, a simple little girl."

"But Misha did visit my own home. At first we lived in a dugout hut, and then in a small house that we built ourselves. He had the bravery to tell my mother he liked me, but I kind of lied to my mother and said the problems of the Komsomol together. He spent the night on a little bed in the house, and I stayed with him, I think he would look at me."

"He could be so cool and business-like sometimes. Once at a Komsomol meeting, in front of everyone at the local cinema house, he was angry with me for not finishing on time a little newspaper we put out. And despite our friendship, he reprimanded me in front of everyone, saying that I'd failed, that I was late. He was shouting at me, disciplining me. Then afterward it was as if nothing had happened. He said, 'Let's go to the movies.' I was at a loss. I couldn't understand why he did what he did, and I said so. He said, 'My dear, one thing has nothing to do with another.'

"That reminds me: Years later I was living way outside of the city with my mother, and the commute was very long and we had hardly any room. By then Gorbachev was in the Central Committee. And so I wrote him a letter, asking him to help me. I wanted to get permission to move into the city center and get an apartment. I reminded him who I was, in case he had forgotten. I got the letter back soon thereafter, and on it he had written simply that it wasn't his area, wasn't his competence, and that I should apply to the city authorities, not him. Just like that, so businesslike. Not one warm word. Deep in my heart I had hoped he would help me, but I suppose he wanted to avoid the appearance of favoritism, like he was helping friends or family unfairly."

"It was very innocent in school. We never said things like 'I never you' to each other. He would never say such things. And on the rare times he put his arm around my shoulder, as if to say, 'Come, let's go to the movies' or somewhere, I would kind of glance over at his hand. Today, not like our young people today. No, it wasn't like our young people today. I finished school first, and went off first to Moscow. But I had no money and could not find any place to live. Remember, this was still a hard time, and so I returned to my village to work as a teacher. I've always thought that Gorbachev somehow thought I was weak for having come home."

"When he went off to [the law faculty of Moscow State University], he wrote letters to me telling me how much he liked Moscow and the abundance of things and the fascinating people. There was never a sense in his letters that he felt any lack of confidence because he was a village boy. There were many letters, and later, when I was married, my husband was so jealous he burned them all. I suppose he didn't know Misha would be general secretary. I'm sorry those letters are all gone."

"I'll tell you how it was. I think the end I felt I was not really good enough for him, or we didn't really fit. He was too energetic, too serious, so organized. And he was smarter than I was. He was the center of attention."

"Our relations began to fall away. We drifted apart. Things were getting lost. But he did send me a letter at the end with his picture, and on it he wrote 'Dom Spiro Spero' in Latin for 'While I am breathing, I am hoping.' I suppose I didn't want to accept."

See GORBACHEV, B9, Col. 1

# The Early Years

GORBACHEV, From B8

were all the victims of propaganda, and we would not really understand these things until we were much older."

Gorbachev, who says now that he wants to create a state based on rule of law, was steeped in the theory of law's opposite. "The theme of anti-state [i.e., political] crimes was touched upon only in very brief and general terms," according to Mlynar. "There was nothing complex about it, as long as you accepted the fundamental principle that political activity upsetting to the government was comparable to any other form of criminal activity." Dissidence among the students was a crime; dozens of students were arrested for ideological missteps and sent to labor camps.

Koltchanov remembers Gorbachev trying doggedly to catch up on his reading with students who had gone to superior schools. He often returned from the dorm's library at 1 or 2 in the morning. "In fact, the dorm room may have been the greatest classroom for all of us," Koltchanov says. "We talked about everything from girls to more serious things: the latest exhibition or the latest artistic awards or historical event. Of course, one subject that was never mentioned was Stalin himself. That was too risky, even with the door closed."

Mlynar, who returned to Czechoslovakia and eventually helped lead Alexander Dubcek's ill-fated "Prague Spring" reforms, now lives in Vienna. Some biographers find a

pleasant irony in what they see as Mlynar's influence on the man who would become the most powerful reformer in the Soviet Union and East Europe. But Koltchanov says "the influence is overrated. Gorbachev was intellectually curious, he was tolerant, but there were no signs of radicalism. You can't make those leaps. Remember, Stalinism was something deep inside us. We were only lucky that we were young enough and flexible enough to change later on."

Much of Gorbachev's time was also taken up with his duties as an officer in the Komsomol.

Once, in 1952, as a professor teaching "Marxism and Issues of Language" droned on—he was reading straight from the works of Stalin—Koltchanov remembers that Gorbachev rose from his chair and said, "Respected professor, we can read for ourselves. What is your interpretation of the reading, and why don't we discuss it?" Gorbachev was summoned to the dean's office. But he was not punished. Probably his position in the Komsomol helped him avoid a suspension.

Two emigres now living in the West who were in Gorbachev's class, Lev Yudovich and Fridrikh Neznansky, remember him as a hard-liner in the Komsomol who made speeches scolding the shortcomings and improprieties of fellow party members. Writing in the emigre journal Possev, Neznansky recalled hearing "the steely voice of the Kom-

somol secretary of the law faculty, Gorbachev, demanding expulsion from the Komsomol for the slightest offense, from telling inappropriate political jokes to trying to avoid being sent to a collective farm."

Midway through his five-year course, Gorbachev met Raisa Titorenko, a philosophy student from Siberia. A few of Gorbachev's friends were taking a ballroom dancing class, and one day Gorbachev and Koltchanov dropped by with the expressed purpose of mocking their buddies. "We were ready to say, 'You call yourselves real men and look at all this,'" Koltchanov says. "But then one

of our friends in the class, Volodya Kuzmin, introduced Mikhail Sergeyevich to his dance partner. It was Raisa Maximovna. I think for Gorbachev it was love at first sight. Just like in the movies. She was just so striking. And, as I think he discovered later on, she was extremely smart." Raisa, for her part, liked Gorbachev, according to Mlynar, for his "lack of vulgarity."

The marriage may have been the most crucial personal event of Gorbachev's youth, but the signal political event for nearly everyone of his generation came in March 1953: the death of Joseph Stalin.

In the years to come, Khrushchev would



Gorbachev, far right, with the cast of "The Snowgirl" in 1949.

set free hundreds of thousands of prisoners and begin to tell the truth about Stalin. Although Gorbachev would choose the path of the party apparatus, churning his way up through the hierarchy, praising Brezhnev and his superiors, he would be one of thousands who would be changed by the 20th Party Congress in 1956 when Khrushchev gave his "secret speech" denouncing Stalin. Through a long process of personal and historical change, Gorbachev would recognize the need to change the country and its relationship to the world.

"Really, we have no alternative," he would say, decades later.

But at the moment Stalin died, there was for Gorbachev and his friends only stunning confusion.

"Most of us were out all night in the freezing cold trying to see the body at the House of Columns," says Koltchanov. "When we all got back to the room, in the early hours of the morning, we were sitting on our beds. We tried to talk, but mostly we were just silent, thinking. Some were crying, though I remember that I wasn't, and neither was Mikhail Sergeyevich. We were so accustomed to life under Stalin. We might find it strange and terrible now, but that was how it was. And then someone spoke the question that everyone had on their minds: 'What are we going to do now?' he said."

In 1955, Gorbachev graduated and returned to Stavropol. There he began his ascent in the Communist Party. When he reached the top of that hierarchy in March 1985, he began to transform the world's last empire, reshaping not only the foundations of his country but also the assumptions of his youth.